Constructivism and History Textbooks

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Abstract

History is often viewed as something we read from books or are told through lectures rather than perceived as an active process of inquiry and discovery. The result of such presentation is that through this passive involvement, students accept the facts presented to them, not realizing the true engaging qualities of the historical process. How then can history transform the students experience into one that encourages students to become active participants in exploring history? The answer lies in presenting history in such a way that invite students to become involved in the interpretation of the past by allowing them to utilize analytical and interpretative skills just as a historian would. Among current approaches to teaching, constructivism most closely resembles the model of learning in which children actively construct things and learn from their own experiences. Applying constructivist concepts to the teaching of history can revolutionize the learning environment, and perhaps recapture the joy of learning as envisaged in the report 'learning without burden'. After a brief exploration into the meaning of constructivism and the theories of the educators who elaborated on it, the article moves on to the examples of constructivist learning from new NCERT history textbooks based on NCF-2005.The article tries to put emphasis on making use of different approaches to serve the needs of student's best and providing greater variety of information.

History is often accused of being loaded with facts and dates. When students are asked to list their favourite subjects, history invariably comes in last. Students consider history 'the most irrelevant' of subjects taught in schools. Bor-r-ing is the adjective they apply to it.

I do not need to convince that history is important. More than any other topic, it is about us. Whether one finds our present society wonderful or awful or both, history reveals how we arrived at this point. Understanding our past is central to our ability to understand

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ourselves and the world around us. We need to know our history. Then arises a question if history has such an important role then what has gone wrong that students find this as a boring subject. I think the problem is less with the students lack of interest than how we teach history. We see that the teaching of history, more than any other discipline, is dominated by textbooks. And students are sometimes right: the books are boring. The stories that history textbooks tell are predictable; every problem has already been solved or is about to be solved. Textbooks exclude conflict or real suspense. Textbooks almost never use the present to illuminate the past. In most classrooms students are expected to learn the 'right' answers to questions defined by others. Memorisation of 'objective' data is the primary focus of most classroom activities. Even supposedly fun and interesting activities usually aim to transmit a narrow range of information to the students' memories. That's why none of the facts is remembered because they are simply presented as one thing after another. Textbooks tend to cover all the important themes of particular periods of history but they rarely give a chance to students to act like real historians, sifting contradictory information and making active interpretations. As a result students exit history textbooks without having developed the ability to look at things historically.

Psychology has furnished ample evidence to the world–evidence that stands today unquestioned—that the child is not merely a passive receiver, but is, by his very nature, an active agent and likes 'doing' or 'constructing' things, and that it is the rottenness of the methods that are employed in teaching him that makes him a passive inert clog on the educational wheel. It is, therefore, a fact at the present day that the child learns a thing very much better if there is a leaven of his own effort mixed up with it. This effort can either be mental or manual: so there is psychological sanction, if not always of current practice, for giving the child opportunities for making the knowledge he receives truly his own by active exercises, whether they are mainly intellectual, aesthetic or manual.

Among the current approaches to teaching, constructivism most closely resembles the model of learning in which children actively construct things and learn from their own experiences. Applying constructivist concepts to the teaching of history can revolutionise the learning environment, and perhaps recapture the joy of learning that is central to human nature.

What is Constructivism?

Constructivism is a view of learning based on the belief that knowledge is not a thing that can be simply transmitted by the teacher to students. Constructivists consider the student as an active learner and the teacher as a facilitator in the learning process. The theory of constructivism is based on the idea that children learn better by actively constructing knowledge and by reconciling new information with prior knowledge. There are many schools of thought within constructivism, but all generally agree on the basic characteristics of constructivist teaching:

- Learner-centred instruction in a democratic environment;
- Active learners who build and create meaning and knowledge;
- Learners who hypothesize, question, investigate, imagine and invent;
- Learners who reflect and make associations with prior knowledge to reach new understandings.

Adopting a constructivist viewpoint has tremendous consequences for educators. It not only changes the nature of knowledge but also the roles of teachers and students. The constructivist perspective emphasises on providing students with opportunities to develop skills and knowledge, which they can relate to their prior knowledge and future utility. In the constructivist curriculum the individual learner has an important role in determining what will be learned. Answers are less clearly right or wrong. Teachers become facilitators or guides instead of the class authority. Lectures give way to student research. The classroom becomes a much more active place.

There are many versions of constructivism. The second version, in particular, has had a considerable impact on educational theory. The first and older is generally known as radical constructivism. It comes directly from Piaget. Its focus is on the individual, where all learning is centred. Piaget saw real learning as happening when an individual came into contact with a new idea that was in conflict with previously held ideas. The 'dissonance' between the two ideas forces the individual to actively examine their world-view and construct a new one. The key role of the teacher in radical constructivism is to promote analytical thinking by creating situations where students have to solve problems that challenges their current ways of thinking.

Another version of constructivism is generally known as social constructivism. It comes from the ideas of Lev Vygotsky, but has a lot in common with the ideas of John Dewey and many others. Social constructivists hold that the social context of learning is at least as important as what happens in the mind of an individual. By interacting with others we come to a public understanding and shared sense of what information is right and what is wrong. The construction of knowledge is a social act, leading to cultural variations in world-views. With social constructivism, group interaction is key. The teacher interacts with the students to come to new understandings. Group work and class discussions are the critical activities in a classroom. It has generally been seen as more suitable than radical constructivism.

History Textbooks and Constructivism

The new NCERT history textbooks are an attempt in this process of construction of knowledge. The most important thing about these new history textbooks is the way they actively engage the student in a dialogic process of constructing possible historical insights. We have already seen that the active engagement of students is the first and foremost concern of constructivism. This important thing is accomplished in the new textbooks through new and innovative ways of guiding interpretations of source extracts. These source extracts have been used to give

students an idea of the evidence on which the arguments of historians are based and more importantly to enable them to evaluate and interpret the sources. For example, on page 45 of Class VI history textbook there is a box on Vishwamitra and the river. This is a dialogue between a sage and two rivers. After this dialogue the historical deduction that sage lived in a society where horses and cows were valued animals is stated. Right after this there are questions for students as to whether chariots were also important and find out the modes of transport mentioned there. Here students are not forced to accept the historian's secondary narration but are given an opportunity to work out bits and pieces of historical reality from the primary source themselves. There are a number of other sources used in the new textbooks. These include photographs of Mohenjodaro, Ashokan inscriptions, beautiful reproductions of early Indian art and craftsmanship, political paintings at the time of the French revolution with exercises inviting students to analyse them, oral accounts of *adivasi* struggles in early twentieth-century Bastar, a seventeenth-century map of a medieval European town, a sketch of a woman operating a treadmill in a cotton-press, a reproduction from a nineteenth-century vellum manuscript of the Quran. This is a random sample, but it conveys some of the excitement of historical evidence, some of the sheer richness of range in the 'sources' used to reconstruct the past that the textbooks communicate. So the obvious dimension of history as a 'discipline'—the skill of making plausible, coherent inferences from limited evidences—is clearly pushed to its limits in these new books and in this way the process of learning history almost becomes, at points, a way of *constructing* it.

These books try to actively engage students not only through sources but also by calling on student's capacity to imagine the past. This is less obvious but perhaps even more basic dimension—that of history as a discipline of the *imagination*, the capacity to visualise the texture of the past in ways circumscribed, but also authorized by available sources. Very few people, after all, would take to history without a certain fascination with how the past looked, felt, sounded, smelt. The fact that our investigation of the past can never be accurate to its original paradigm does not disable this fascination; it provokes and intrigues it.

One of the challenges and pleasures offered by the new books is *de-familiarisation*. The deployment of the literary and methodological device of 'making strange', is central to the historians craft. In a sense all critical thought has this function—to render unfamiliar what may appear to be a matter of 'common sense', to ask questions about things we take for granted. The particular variant of this device that the historian has recourse to is to reveal that things have a past, and that they came to be what they were (or are) through complex processes and entanglements. This is a concern that resonates through the new NCERT history books. It is a concern that is perhaps most explicit in the textbook *Our Pasts*-I for Class VI. All the chapters of this book begin with a child encountering something that makes him/her think

afresh, wonder about an everyday, taken-for-granted reality. The very first lines of the book are these:

Rasheeda sat reading the newspaper. Suddenly, her eyes fell on a small headline: 'One Hundred Years Ago'. How, she wondered, could anyone know what had happened so many years ago?

This becomes the starting point for a brief, simple, but extremely skilful exploration of how we know what we know about the past—an introduction to historical evidence that avoids being either banal or prescriptive, but instead presents historical knowing in the most accessible of ways, as an adventure.

From the point of view of constructivism another important component of these textbooks to consider is the connection between what is learned and the student's wider life. Information learned purely in isolation is not very useful, and usually soon forgotten. No objective test can really establish connections for a student that make the material an integral part of their life. This is especially important for taking history beyond the level of trivia, and helps answer the annoying question: 'Why do I need to know this?' Wherever possible the new books strive to find connections between what is studied and the student's lives. This is explicitly built into the lesson as a discussion or as a part of the evaluation at the end. In Chapter 1 of Class XII *Themes in Indian History, Part I* there is a source box on how artefacts are identified. This source is an excerpt from one of the earliest reports by Earnest Mackay on excavations at Mohenjodaro. In this excerpt he talked about saddle querns —how they were found, the material used to make them and how they looked besides many other things. Then he tried to make connection between those saddle querns with modern day querns. Through this excerpt students have been given an idea how archaeologists use present day analogies to try and understand what ancient artefacts were used for. But they are not compelled to accept this as fact rather they have been given a chance to explore and think whether this correlation is a useful strategy or not? These kinds of exercises take students beyond the textbook and instigate them to see things around them more critically. Similarly an exercise at the end of Chapter 4 of Class VI *Our Pasts*, which deals with Harappan civilization, asks students to identify old buildings in their locality, and to find out how old they are and who looks after them—thereby making connection with the student's lives. So the textbooks not only try to connect the content with student's life outside the school but also try to inculcate in the children a desire to explore and understand things on their own. These examples run throughout the book.

It is true that these textbooks have made an attempt in the process of construction of knowledge. But like other approaches constructivism too has its limitations, particularly in typical school settings. So an honest appraisal of the limitations of constructivism is important here if teachers are to effectively implement new ideas without wasting time and effort.

The first problem with the adoption of this approach is that it might not be the most appropriate theory of how people learn. The basic principles of

constructivism were laid down a century ago and new studies of brain functions are producing a more scientific view of how learning takes place. In both constructivism and objectivism, it is believed that the brain is a learning machine, learning all types of things with the same mechanisms. But new brain studies show that different types of knowledge are learned by different parts of the brain in different ways. Some things seem to be 'hardwired' into the brain, which dictates how that information is learned. The way children learn grammar seems to fit this model. This means that some types of learning more closely follow the objectivist pattern than the constructivist. Other more complex types of knowledge are more likely to involve multiple parts of the brain, and more closely fit the constructivist model. So the nature of the information that we are trying to teach may decide the type of the approach we take.

A more immediate concern for the teacher is that constructivism does not fit the current educational environment in most schools. Most schools focus on standardised exams. Teachers concerned about their students' future cannot afford to ignore these exams. These exams are highly marks focussed. And marking constructivist products in such a situation is not always easy because student's understanding of the material will be personal. Answers will vary from student to student. The general push to memorize and review commonly tested information tends to greatly limit constructivism's use. Sometimes school structures also create problems to constructivism. Short class periods make it difficult to go deep into a subject in a day. Fragmented class schedules fragment students thinking in the course of a day. Another obstacle to the use of constructivism comes from the paucity of material support for this approach. Textbooks are increasingly using primary sources, but in a small amount. A teacher will have to collect more materials to carry out constructivist instruction. In a country like ours students may or may not have access to the materials required to do the kinds of comparison and deep analysis that is the essence of constructivism.

There is continuous debate going on between objectivism and constructivism and sometimes this debate itself poses a problem. The classroom teacher, who wants to know the best way to teach, hears arguments for both these approaches and gets confused. As a result many teachers simply decide to follow a method with which he or she is comfortable. It does not have to be objectivism or constructivism.

Conclusion

In reality, both objectivist and constructivist approaches are useful in the classroom, depending on the nature of the information students need to learn. Before exploring a subject in depth it is usually good to familiarize students with important basic information such as chronology, vocabulary and geography. Objectivist approaches such as lecture can be an effective way of teaching this information before students do research or work in a more constructivist manner. Combining approaches is probably going to serve the needs of not only of students but also of

teachers and provides greater variety of information. Classroom teachers need to avoid getting caught up in the debate between the two approaches, and instead make use of any technique that suits their needs. But in a subject as complex and open to interpretation as history, it is important that we make greater use of constructivism if we are to remain a relevant and vital part of the curriculum.

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